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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 COLOMBO 001708

SIPDIS

DEPARTMENT FOR SA, SA/INS
NSC FOR E. MILLARD

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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [SOCI](#) [EINV](#) [CE](#) [LTTE](#)

SUBJECT: Key Muslim Minister discusses peace process
issues with Ambassador

Ref: Colombo 1693, and previous

(U) Classified by Ambassador Jeffrey J. Lunstead.
Reasons 1.5 (b, d).

1. (C) SUMMARY: The Ambassador met September 30 with Rauf Hakeem, Muslim party leader and Minister of Ports and Shipping. Asked for his views regarding the peace process, Hakeem expressed his concern over the Tigers' absence from the negotiating table and their apparent efforts to marginalize Muslim political leaders. Despite reports to the contrary, he did not think Muslims in the east were being radicalized by funding from the Middle East. Hakeem also spoke about improving the President-PM cohabitation relationship and touched on plans for Colombo Port. While clearly worried about the LTTE, Hakeem appeared relatively upbeat about the peace process. END SUMMARY.

2. (C) MEETING WITH MUSLIM LEADER: On September 30, in his first official courtesy call after presenting his credentials on September 26, Ambassador Lunstead met with Rauf Hakeem, the leader of the Sri Lankan Muslim Congress (SLMC), the country's largest Muslim party. Hakeem also serves the United National Front government as the Minister of Port Development and Shipping, Eastern Development and Muslim Affairs. AID Director and poloff also attended the meeting.

3. (C) INSIGHTS ON THE PEACE PROCESS: Asked for his views on the status of the peace process, Hakeem expressed concern about the Tigers' continued absence from the negotiating table and their apparent efforts to marginalize national Muslim political leaders by meeting with "civil society" Muslim leaders at the local level in the east. Despite personal assurances by the LTTE leadership that the group would address Muslim concerns, Hakeem was worried that the Tigers' focus on Muslim civil society groups was, in fact, an attempt to avoid substantive political dialogue with Muslim leaders. The important thing, the Ambassador and Hakeem both agreed, was maintaining a pluralistic political society in the east. Hakeem added that the GSL and the LTTE had agreed at the Bangkok round of talks in January to include a separate Muslim delegation at an appropriate point in the future. The Tigers had now backed away from that, and were refusing a separate Muslim delegation. Prime Minister Wickremesinghe had further indicated that he would welcome a Muslim-delegation response to the Tigers' awaited "counterproposal" to the government's north/east interim administration proposal. Sharing his thoughts about the motivations behind the LTTE's delay in returning to the negotiation table, Hakeem characterized the group's actions as a stalling tactic. He felt the Tigers were using the break in talks to create legitimacy for their own infrastructure and organizations in the north/east.

4. (C) Hakeem also expressed appreciation for the United States' sustained expression of public concern about the LTTE. In that regard, the Ambassador explained that the LTTE would soon be redesignated a U.S. Foreign Terrorist Organization. The Ambassador also noted the significance of the international community's united front in support of the peace process, as evidenced by the joint statement issued at the Tokyo conference follow-up meeting held in Colombo on September 12.

5. (C) MUSLIM RADICALIZATION IN THE EAST?: Responding to a question, Hakeem stated he was monitoring the environment in the east, but did not think that Muslims there were being radicalized. Although Middle East sources were providing some funding for mosques and madrassahs, the needs of Sri Lankan Muslims, as a minority needing to co-exist in the wider community, were different from Middle Eastern Muslim-majority countries. Hakeem felt that radicalization, if it were to occur, would be the result of the poor socioeconomic situation prevailing in the east. He and AID Director then discussed the unemployment problem affecting the Muslim community in the east and the possibility of AID-

supported skills development programs.

16. (C) COMMENTS ON COHABITATION: Regarding Sri Lanka's endemic cohabitation tensions, Hakeem stated that the President and the Prime Minister needed to put aside their differences and work together in the national interest. That said, he believed the PM had made a serious error by not formally including the Opposition in the peace process from the beginning. Dismissing all the specific issues that provoke public cohabitation tension, Hakeem said the President's agitation stemmed from her lame-duck status: she is unable to run again for President when her term is up in two years, but would not be content to swap the executive presidency for the prime minister's office. Hakeem said he would try to work to calm down cohabitation tensions.

17. (C) IMPROVEMENTS AT COLOMBO PORT: Switching gears, Hakeem and the Ambassador also discussed the development potential of Colombo Port. Hakeem described a "quantum leap in productivity" for the largest port in South Asia and one of the largest 35 in the world. Ships were being processed three times as fast and the port was handling 24 percent more containers compared with last year. Hakeem said he had negotiated long-term agreements with several major shipping companies despite their financial interests in the privatized side of the port. The Ambassador stated that U.S. companies were very interested in Sri Lanka, and infrastructure improvements, such as those for the port, would be key in these companies' investment decisions.

18. (C) COMMENT: Hakeem used the meeting to brief the Ambassador on his concerns regarding the Tigers. That said, after getting these concerns off his chest, Hakeem seemed relatively upbeat about the peace process. In particular, he seemed fairly confident that the Muslims would have an independent seat at the peace negotiating table, despite current Tiger opposition. END COMMENT.

19. (U) Minimize considered.

LUNSTEAD